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# **Children's agency in the modern primary classroom**

## **Abstract**

This paper examines where and how children achieve agency in the primary classroom, drawing on a multimodal ethnography of the Year One classroom. It utilizes a relational conceptualisation of agency, where children act purposively to achieve outcomes of educational relevance. It demonstrates that children achieve agency performing 'good' and 'clever' child subject positions, helping to make classroom life more liveable, although this form of agency is limited when dealing with unexpected challenges. Children also deviate, finding moments to pursue desires and ways of knowing not provided for within the classroom, insinuating a political critique of the current education system.

## **Key words:**

Children; agency; politics, school; education.

## **Introduction**

Children's agency in their everyday lives has been widely illustrated, within childhood studies and beyond, but often their agency is 'glossed over, taken to be an essential, virtually unmediated characteristic of humans that does not require much explanation' (Prout, 2005, p.64-5). This paper explores agency as a phenomenon to be 'described, understood and explained' (Biesta and Teddler, 2006, p.9), through discussion of an empirical study on children's agency in Year One primary classrooms.

Education systems have undergone extensive reforms globally, with an emphasis on the knowledge-economy and comparability (Steiner-Khansi, 2016). A standardised push focuses on core subjects, test-based accountability and corporate managerialism, underpinned by values of individualism and competition. A critical side effect is the promotion of children's conformity and minimising experimentation, alternative pedagogies and risk-taking (Sahlberg, 2015). Within England, this has translated into a primary concern with the acquisition of core academic knowledge and skills, and socialisation into behaviours considered appropriate for such learning.

More broadly, pupil agency is viewed as central to education, including by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2018). It is seen as core to its purposes, which Biesta (2010a) proposes includes two domains supporting individuals to operate within the

existing socio-political configurations and settings (acquiring knowledge, skills and dispositions, what he calls ‘qualifications’, as well as socialisation), plus the third orientating individuals towards other ways of doing and being (subjectification). Discussing learning, Hodkinson and colleagues (2008) stress the importance of analysing the learning culture that ‘will permit, promote, inhibit or rule out certain kinds of learning’, and human agency, where ‘Each participant in a learning culture contributes to the reconstruction of that Culture’ (p.37).

In this paper, I examine where and how children achieve agency in the classroom, drawing on research in a Year One classroom, conducted over the course of a school year. This was in a medium-sized state-funded primary school, in a large town in the southeast of England, rated ‘good’ overall by the governmental Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). It is situated in a central urban area with a catchment that is predominantly middle-class (three-quarters of the class have one or both parents educated to degree level) and white, with some ethnic diversity; below average pupils are supported by the pupil premium.

I adopt a Rancièrian (1991) logic of the equality of intelligence between adults and children, to see what might follow from this assumption. Rancière writes of the emancipatory possibilities of education. His critique is of the ‘stultifying’ explicative classroom order that imparts knowledge and explanation, rooted in the belief of students’ inferiority of intelligence, where a child grieves that ‘he doesn’t understand unless he is explained to’ (p. 8). Rancière recounts an alternative ‘ignorant schoolmaster’, who acts on a premise of equality of all beings, demanding students pay attention to what one sees and says. His emphasises is on how children construct themselves in relation to categories laid on and demanded of them within an explicative classroom, and identifies moments in which they act under the presumption of equality. This paper is itself a Rancièrian (1999) act of politics as aesthetics; ‘it makes visible what had been excluded from a perceptual field’ and ‘makes audible what used to be inaudible’ (p.36). Following Rancière’s (1991) lead, it tells a story and is an ‘intervention’ rather than a ‘class’ on children’s agency; it is for readers to render their own translation and to tell their own story in return (Bingham and Biesta, 2010, p.156).

I begin by exploring what is meant by ‘agency’, before outlining the ethnographic approach used to research this phenomenon. I detail children’s agency in the way they competently conform to what is expected and how they creatively pursue transformation rather than conformity.

## Conceptualising children's agency

### Relational and temporal theories of agency

From the 1990s, there emerged a new interdisciplinary field of knowledge of childhood studies, allowing for the possibility of children's agency, with children seen as active meaning-makers in the construction of their social lives (James and Prout, 1990). There has been a move away from an understanding of agency rooted in modernist discourses of personhood, with concerns for authenticity and voice, to one in line with post-modern thinking and a distributed understanding of agency (Oswell, 2013). This brings a focus to examining how 'children's agency might be assembled and infrastructured within and across a range of devices, materialities, technologies and other sentient beings' (Oswell, 2016, p. 37), including the biological level (Prout, 2005). Moran-Ellis (2013) makes the important distinction between *social competence* or the *capacity* to act strategically for particular ends and *agency*, which is a purposive action that achieves some change. As such, agency is *not* possessed as an internal capacity; instead 'the capacity to do and to make a difference is necessarily dispersed across an arrangement' (Oswell, 2013, p. 270). Within such an analysis, the 'societal contexts that shape, enable or restrict' (Abebe, 2019, p.5) possibilities for agency are an important focus.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) recognize the dynamic interplay of three temporal elements (past/future/present) within their relational understanding of agency. Their work has been extended and applied to research on life-long learning (Biesta and Tedder, 2006) and teacher agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2015), providing a useful framework with which to explore children's agency orientations within the classroom. I outline each element in turn.

The first, 'the iterational orientation', relates to how the past, through pre-reflexive habit and repetition, becomes a stabilising influence that shapes effort, allowing us to sustain subjectivities, meanings, and interactions over time. Mahmood's (2005) theory of agency offers such an example that addresses a gap within existing education and childhood studies. For her, agency is found embedded within a submission to existing norms. She takes up Foucault's (1988) later work on ethical formation, in which individuals self-govern their behaviour against societal codes and ethics, within her study of the modern women's Muslim piety movement in Egypt, which includes a focus on practices associated with patriarchal norms about women's submission to male authority. She explores how agency might be embedded within a submission to relations of subordination, rather than simply as resistance

to norms. Mahmood draws on the original meaning of ‘docility’ as the willingness and aptness to be taught, implying ‘struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement’ (p.29), giving the example of how novice musicians and apprentices must submit themselves to a regime of disciplinary practice to achieve mastery and subsequent agency in their field. She is interested in the diversity of how ‘norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated’ (p.23).

The second orientation, ‘projectivity’, is an imaginative engagement with the future, distancing oneself from habits/traditions. Imagination has been stressed as key for secondary educational practice as a means of mapping possible aspirational transformations and supporting these, where ‘the imagined landscape of the new is as important and significant as the material landscape of one’s location’ (Walkerdine, 2013, p.757). The ‘Practical-evaluative’ is the third orientation, referring to situationally based judgments that may challenge received patterns of action and contexts, while made within the constraints of power and resources (Priestley *et al.*, 2015, p.33). For example, Sharma (2007) illustrates how rural Indian children subtly probe their science teacher so they can more safely tap into the main electricity grid; they leverage their out of school discourse and experiential knowledge of electricity, together with a concern for safety, ‘to make their agentic action possible’ (p.314).

Agency orientations (may) shift within contexts that are themselves changing, reflecting both the consistency and stability, as well as contingency and particularity of relational agency (Oswell, 2013, p. 16). Shifting orientation draws attention to the specific situations that “facilitate” different ways of being – and more specifically: different ways of being agentic’ (Biesta and Tedder, 2006, p.21), in which it is always ‘actors acting by-means-of-an-environment rather than simply *in* an environment’ (p.19).

### **Political agency**

Childhood studies has begun to explore children’s agency as political, in contrast to participation discourses that seldom refer to civil and political rights, beyond a depoliticised ‘voice’ in decisions affecting the child (Nolas, 2015). For Kallio and Häkli (2011), asking ‘*how* things are political’ (p. 27, original emphasis), includes children’s ‘potential to adopt and negotiate the subject positions that are offered to them’ (p.28), and the tactics they use to avoid available subjectivities. Youdell’s (2011) school-based ethnography, for example, excavates normative constitutions of student subjectivities and the moments that open

possibilities for the emergence of other subjectivities. Situating the materiality of children's lives also emphasises how shifting subjectivities emerge 'out of the dynamic intra-action between discourse and matter' (Spyrou, 2018, p.142). Within childhood studies, the processes by which humans become subjects have been 'paid far less attention than is the exercise of power on children' (Valentine, 2011, p.352).

Integral to Rancière's work is an understanding of performativity aligned to that of Butler's (1993) in which 'the reiteration of norms which recede, constrain and exceed the performer' (p. 234). Subjectivities and social action are produced through the repetition of circulating discourses, without there being any hard-wired traits determining who the child is or can be (Oswell, 2013). Subject positions are always in process, never fixed. Rancière's (1991) concern is with liberty and emancipation (not pedagogy), as a means of generating new political subjectivities: 'what an intelligence can do when it considers itself equal to any other and considers any other equal to it' (p.39). 'Dissensus' emerges as a challenge to the consensus of the 'police' order, one that dictates the division between what is visible and sayable, with the logic of equality. This is done by redistributing 'the demarcations between "noise" and "voice," . . . on the basis of the "simple" claim that one is producing "voice" rather than "noise"' (Bingham and Biesta, 2010,p.87).

### **Entanglements of agency**

This paper is situated within a relational and temporal theory of agency, distributed across an 'entanglement' of things (Barad, 2007). It focuses on the everyday ways in which different entanglements shift agentic orientations, and extend or decrease the scope and scale of children's agency (Moran-Ellis, 2013), whether emerging by accident or with planning. Through examining children's lived experiences in the micro practices of the school day, I trace the social regularities through which children's subject positions are produced, and children's complex negotiation of such positions. I examine how taking up different subject positions offers affordances and foreclosures to agency. Such an analysis offers a nuanced understanding of agency, emphasising children's inventive power, and extending beyond simple framings of resistance as opposed to conformity, where, for example, the effort and exertion involved in inhabiting norms might also become a form of agency.

### **Methodology: ethnographic focus on children's inventiveness**

This study draws on an ethnography focusing on a Year One classroom, chosen because this is the beginning of formal schooling, with a marked step up from the Reception class. The

study was conducted after the introduction of a demanding new national curriculum, emphasising the measurable in maths and literacy (Department for Education, 2014).

The study included a wide-angle view of the whole classroom — I observed the class and interviewed 29 children individually, plus conducted focus groups with all children — and I narrowed my gaze by shadowing six children for a minimum of two days each. This included a day visiting the children at home in the morning before school, and returning home with them afterwards. I interviewed these key informants at different points in the day to ask how they experienced the learning activities and how they understood themselves as learners. Using school records, careful consideration was given to the selection of six informants to ensure a mix of gender, social and ethnic background, current academic achievement, and birth order. The selection also considered children's agentic orientations, as observed in the classroom and my initial interviews, through their response to challenge, how much they speak out, question authority and communicate feelings. With the children, I used creative interviewing methods including crafting, feeling faces, storytelling, photography and film elicitation. I also interviewed ten staff and six parents, and collected demographic information on pupils using a parent self-completion questionnaire.

I coded my data in the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. This more easily allowed me to examine the breadth of the data through retrieving many segmented examples of text that are similarly coded, while not excluding the intensification of my gaze and 'mining for meaning' where I see a 'glow', and again zooming out to make connections to the wider data (Maclure, 2010, p.282).

### **Children's agency in conformity – the 'good' and 'clever' child**

In the classroom focused on outcomes, efficiency and accountability, prevalent discourses and practices emphasise a normative 'on-task' pupil body as silent and still. The timetable is dominated by core learning activities: 19 out of 25 weekly lessons are maths and English related, plus two assemblies and one Golden 'play' Time. The focus on core learning is underpinned by an emphasis on bodily discipline with children expected to sit for long portions of the day, in neat rows, listening to what teachers know: 'Remember good sitting and listening means good learning' (teacher).

In this section, I explore how children adopt ‘good’ and ‘clever’ positions in the on-task classroom that involves both effort and resistance; children demonstrate their cultural competency by working hard to perform what adults expect, contributing to the culture of conformity. I suggest such navigation of the classroom is illustrative of the iterative element of agency and has limits educationally.

### **Agency in Conformity - The Good Child**

Roma is one of the girls most often seen sitting upright and silent, frequently with her finger on her lips. She performs the ‘good’ child, in its adjectival meaning, demonstrating the qualities required for the role of the pupil being on-task. There are gendered variations here, with sitting upright typically a feminised way of being good: more girls than boys sit with fingers on lips.

Making sure she is seen to be good is what Roma does well: ‘I try to get noticed . . . just by sitting still’. One summer’s morning, during an English lesson, Roma must write answers to questions about her chosen animal, a snake. She asks Alfie if she can copy his work, who says ‘No’. Roma sits making a small mark on her worksheet, producing an ‘overt working impression’ (Pollard, 1985, p.181), until Ms. Peach, the class teacher, comes over telling Roma to ‘write that it eats meat’ and an ‘interesting fact that snakes have eye lashes’. Roma writes ‘meet’, then spends over five minutes shuffling papers and looking around, before asking me what the next box says on her worksheet: ‘Other interesting facts’. Roma reads, ‘Snakes have a perfect way of hiding’, checking with Alfie that this is okay to write before beginning the first word. She pauses to rub out a misplaced comma. When, after 20 minutes, the teacher announces there is one minute left, Roma has written three words and speedily writes three more, leaving her sentence unfinished. She sits on the carpet with her finger on her mouth and is one of the first selected to get up for lunch.

Roma is currently in the third level English group; she is ‘worried of learning’, telling me, ‘I don’t like the stupid learning; I like to go home to play’, although she can feel ‘happy with easy learning and learning that I like’. She is diligent in this writing task, but clearly reticent, set back in part by her lack of understanding. She asks for help but waits to do so, later telling me she prefers to think ‘what I’m supposed to do’. She does little more than try to copy or write what the teacher dictates, but chooses her own interesting fact. Her last minute haste is something many children do to avoid chastisement or loss of playtime. Roma gets through, rather than inhabits this task, performing being on-task more than doing much work; she has



perfected a way of camouflaging her limited understanding and engagement in challenging school activities.

Roma has also perfected the art of being noticed for being ‘good’ by sitting quietly. Other research identifies children keep silent to encourage teacher talk: ‘by no means is the silent child not a competent child’ (Silverman *et al.*, 1998, p.239). Staff identify her reluctance ‘to have a go’ and ask for help as a conflation between ‘not understanding’ and ‘not being good’. There are other children who submit themselves to the on-task classroom to advance their curricula learning, rather than to avoid activities. They work diligently and quietly, and are currently achieving highly, but avoid expressing something of themselves beyond being ‘good’ and ‘clever’, reticent to express an opinion, preferring to play it safe when there are no clues to answer my questions (see Kirby and Webb, forthcoming).

We see children’s competence in understanding the demands of the classroom, with a strong iterational dimension of agency shaping the children’s effort to create a good impression. Thinking with Mahmood (2005), we see how relations of subordination enable a capacity for action. Children’s agency, while limited, is evident in the practices demanding ethical labour: navigating the different ways to perform, inhabit and experience the norms of the good child.

### **Agency in Conformity – The Clever Child**

Children understand that they must demonstrate what they know. School practices and discourses promote a judgement of children based on their assumed ‘ability’, a highly contested concept (Hart *et al.*, 2004). The language of being ‘clever’ is prevalent, used to comment and praise, mostly for knowing correct answers. The middle-class children more confidently and frequently assert their cleverness, as do their parents (also see Reay, 2017). Grouping by current ability reinforces hierarchies in the classroom – the highest groups are mostly middle class, male and older – with some children aware of their place in the rankings: ‘[ours] is the smartest group’. Performing ‘cleverness’ in this context, I suggest, is a form of agency, with children trying to work out and deliver on what is expected, but again it gets them only so far.

One spring morning, Alice does not know the correct response during an English activity. Sitting at a table with others, she must write a list of items needed to plant beans, an activity she did the day before. She gets straight into the task, writing ‘bag’, ‘water’, ‘seed’ and ‘sunlight’, but then there is an expectant fifth line on her worksheet at which Alice stumbles.

She pauses, appears to ponder, then sits back, looking up, saying ‘Hmm’ repeatedly; she faces me and I wonder if she is calling for my help.

Alice’s response to challenge is to maintain a quiet conforming pupil position, often associated with femininity. She does not question or verbally seek support. Later, watching a film of herself at this moment, she tells me ‘I was thinking hard, that’s why I look smart’. She is thinking what is expected by that line. Finally, without adding more, she shows her work to the teacher who instructs Alice to add ‘five’ and ‘dry’ to describe her seeds. Alice is highly focused on task completion in this activity: the only words she initiates to her teacher are ‘Done’, ‘Now I’ve done it’, ‘Now I’m done’. An underlying unease perhaps propels Alice ‘to grasp for quick solutions . . . to be able to put an end to such anxieties’ (Salzberger-Wittenberg, 1983, p.57), and finishing work results in highly desirable ‘free-choice’ time.

We see Alice forming her subjectivity by repeatedly performing norms of intelligence which include a focus on task completion and an avoidance of challenge, helping to consolidate an impression of ‘being intelligent’. Alice repeatedly tells me she is clever and that to become clever you need to listen to the teacher. She signals her possible vulnerability to the discourse of ability and failure, so must repeatedly perform intelligence; she shifts quickly from my questions about what ‘smart’ means to demonstrating her competence at counting in 10s. Performing intelligence, which children are mastering and want to show, serves them in the classroom, and as such is a form of agency, a way of ‘making do’ (de Certeau, 1984, p.29) and working within the constraints of the classroom in order to ‘be’.

Alice’s performance of intelligence is halted in the context of something novel and unscripted. The switch can be so subtle but the little line is folded into the rigid structure of the national curriculum and accountability frameworks — everything must be documented — and back into Alice herself. She is seeking what is expected, not making meaning, echoing Willes’ (1983) research finding that the child’s primary duty is to find out and do what the teacher wants.

An anxiety about not knowing answers can leave children immobilised when faced with something they do not understand. In the afternoon, that same spring day, Alice and others at her table cannot understand cards instructing them to write words in different ways, for example in upper and lowercase. Alice writes nothing in this 29-minute activity, instead exploring the material properties of her paper, engaged in a form of silent defensive resistance to her vulnerability. To her side, Stuart cannot resist and becomes visibly

distressed, despite suggestions from other children at the table. Stuart and Alice meet with the incomprehensibility of the instruction cards, which do not relate to any meaningful activity or build on what they know, emphasising their ignorance and inequality. The cards act upon their tired bodies – Alice is yawning – identifying them as so utterly unable that they can no longer perform the intelligent pupil and ‘try my best’, as Alice likes to do, or to be ‘done’.

Drawing on Mahmood (2005) again, we see children’s iterative agency orientation in how they conduct themselves, repeatedly and continuously working out how to succeed. This includes a willingness and effort to determine and deliver on what is expected; performing cleverness by finding the correct answer. This type of agency is again limited in the face of new challenges where there is no clue to the answer. The effort is particularly strenuous, because it involves negotiating alone emotions of not knowing what is expected and failure, which can feel frightening: Alfie talks of ‘emergency’ feelings when working. We see resistance within conformity, as children work to avoid effort where the answer is unclear, to make classroom life more liveable. In the next section, I examine moments when children achieve a greater scale of agency, responding with something new.

### **Agency in Transformation - The Desiring Child**

Children deviate from being on-task in the everyday classroom, pursuing their desires, including to laugh, move, speak, create and collaborate. They utilise their ordinary ways of operating to make meaning, using their ‘one hundred languages’ (Malguzzi, n.d.). In this section, we follow what I call their lines of desire. A term adopted from Moor’s (2017) ‘desiring lines’, used by town planners to describe the paths that appear where people walk away from designated routes, and adopted by Nolas and Varvantakis (forthcoming) to describe an ontological orientation to fieldwork with children. I suggest the lines children trace, roaming briefly into unknown territories beyond the narrow confines of the explicative on-task order, are not simply a form of resistance. Children are productive in their pursuit of interests and desires not provided for in the on-task classroom; incorporating the projective element of agency. I focus here on how children create stories in a context in which English lessons focus on grammatical constructs at the expense of wonder, artistry and personal meaning.

In a December English lesson, the question displayed on the whiteboard is ‘can I write a winter poem?’ with the instruction to use adjectives and to ‘put your ideas in a sentence’. Alice is sitting at a table with other children and a teaching assistant, Ms. French. In a

previous lesson, she had decorated a worksheet picture of a Christmas present, drawn a dog and written some adjectives in preparation to write a poem about the present. Ms. French tells her to use the adjectives in a sentence. Alice appears not to understand, reading aloud ‘beautiful, pretty’, two adjectives on her preparation sheet. She is told to think ‘How can we use beautiful in the middle? The beautiful?’, but Alice says only ‘Present’, seemingly unsure. As Ms. French’s attention is drawn away, Alice becomes absorbed in writing ‘The beautiful dog is nice when she wags her tail’. She then reads this to Ms. French, who says it is an ‘amazing sentence’ but that Alice is supposed to be writing *about* the present, rather than what is *inside*. She probes ‘The beautiful present is?’, so that Alice slowly rubs out her original work and writes ‘the beautiful present’. She is asked ‘Where is your beautiful present?’ and Alice writes ‘the big table’, leaving two disjointed phrases that Ms. French later completes to make a sentence. Now done, Alice goes into the play corner, sits under a table and writes her name on its underside.

During this lesson, momentarily away from the adult gaze and task constraints, Alice writes her own composition: drawn to the typical interest of what is *inside* the present. Her sentence is coherent and meaningful, particularly to Alice, who loves her dog. If anything, it is constrained by the ambiguous addition of the adjectives, suggesting there is another less beautiful dog who is not nice and the dog is only nice when it wags its tail. Alice’s creation erased, she must describe the Christmas present, or more specifically, *where* it is, resulting in disjointed phrases; the meaning lost, the adult completes the work. Even in the two short phrases, Alice creates intrigue, inviting the reader to wonder why the present is not under a Christmas tree; however, the answer to the teacher’s initial question is ‘No’, she cannot write a poem. Alice has not managed to fit her work and herself to the constraints imposed. Here writing has become rules to master rather than something of personal significance that she can inhabit: a case of the proverbial tail wagging the dog.

The tight prescription of the task, and the intervention to keep Alice on-task, is stultifying because it assumes she is unable to learn without such an explanation. She sits under a table, out of place like the present, making the type of ‘wild transitory mark’, that de Certeau (1984, p.155) suggests denies the child’s docility in executing orders. Signing her name is an assertion of who she is, authorising herself as a writer, if only to herself; children often write their names in my field notebook and Julia explains this is ‘so that other people know who they are’. At home, Alice loves writing stories in which she conveys humorous drama,

revealing a ‘purposeful artistry’ (Featherstone, 2017, p.24), and re-writes favourite books, interpreting and selecting as a means of ‘reconfiguring’ her world (Rancière, 2007, p. 277).

Children demonstrate agency by skilfully ensuring time off from doing what the teacher demands; purposively and successfully deviating from the certainty emphasised in the classroom to pursue meandering lines of desire. I suggest these lines demonstrate a reflective intelligence seen in children’s ‘imaginative distancing’ of the habitual patterns of engagement demanded by the on-task classroom, integral to the projective element of agency; they are distancing themselves from being either ‘good’ or ‘clever’. The practical-evaluative dimension of agency is seen in children mostly carefully pursuing subterranean lines out of the gaze of the teachers, while appearing to remain on-task at the surface.

## **Children’s agency discussed**

There are different kinds of agency, affording different courses of action, under different circumstances; this includes different purposeful gestures, utterances and expressions that establish, at the very least, a space to be, and preferably a place to thrive. In this paper, we see how distributed agency ‘circulates around children’ (Oswell, 2013, p. 268); it is enacted and achieved, but also constrained, through entangled relations. This includes social relations with adults and peers, whether close by or out of sight, and government policy. It includes classroom materiality, such as pencils, paper and (the underside of) desks, as well as children’s (sometimes tired) bodies. Children’s agency also connects across the boundary of the school gates to include a home passion for storytelling and much-loved dog. Children’s agentic orientations are not restricted to human individual or group capacity, but exist only in ‘interconnectedness . . . brought about in relations’ (Raithelhuber, 2016, p. 103).

### **Agency in navigating conformity**

The performative is integral and intensified in modern schooling. Children adopt different subject positions, purposefully navigating their conformity in the on-task classroom; their endurance is not docility, but a means by which they navigate their situation to make it liveable (Mahmood, 2005). Through their understanding of what is expected of them, the children suggest an intelligence equal to those who demand their compliance (Rancière, 1991).

Their agency here incorporates an ‘iterational orientation’; utilising what they know, children work hard to take up their subordination within ‘good’ and ‘clever’ subject positions, achieving successful performances of required norms that ensure they are recognisable as on-

task learners. Children's agency, while limited, is evident in practices demanding their personal investment, including bodily and emotional struggle, that also lead to an avoidance of challenge. In a classroom where being 'good' is associated with *appearing* on-task, children's compliant practices constitute 'good child' subjectivities. There is a separation of the 'good child' from the 'good pupil' in the on-task classroom.

The practical-evaluative dimension of their agency is seen in the different strategies children utilise in the present moment. These include *attracting* positive staff attention, by sitting quietly and drawing attention to achievements, and *averting* the adult gaze by being so silent and still to absent themselves; pretending to engage in order to resist effort in learning. For there are limits to an agency pursuing compliance. Taking up the 'good' subject position leaves some children with little space to exist more fully in the world. Being 'clever' reflects a concern with value and the symbolic power of the quantifiable, evidenced for example by English and maths sets, and test scores. This encourages children to identify correct responses, but it does not serve them well when tackling new and unexpected challenges for which there is no clear answer. Structures that legitimise meritocratic competition render students vulnerable to revealing ignorance, so that they 'minimize the risks by throwing a smoke-screen of vagueness over the possibility of truth or error' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p. 114).

### **Agency in desiring transformation**

Children's 'lines of desire', paths they trace that deviate from being on-task, are identified as a productive agency in their pursuit of interests and desires not provided for in the on-task classroom; to engage in ways that are meaningful and purposeful to them, and to pursue transformation rather than simply conformity. This is where the projective element of their agency is evident. Children are not simply wasting time by resisting learning (although sometimes they may be); instead, we see children's agency in the pursuit of desiring lines offering productive paths of acting, feeling and thinking. As such, their actions insinuate a critique of the on-task classroom.

Being off-task is viewed in need of correction, but whether such deviations are 'good' or 'bad' agency, Priestly and colleagues (2015) remind us, must be judged on their relation to educational purpose. Lines of desire go beyond the accumulation of existing knowledge and socialisation, and instead offer transformative imaginary possibilities. Children are keen to participate in what is meaningful and engaging, when there is something purposeful to

pursue. When tracing their lines, there is an evident intensity and satisfaction in the children's capacities to act, and they embody a desire for being educated: allowing for the transformation of the subject and existing social orders (subjectification). Pursuing transformation without a teacher, the desiring child remains largely self-educated.

### **Scope and scale of agency across different groups**

The scope of children's agency is constrained by their place in the generational order and their lack of power to counter the school's on-task culture and behavioural mechanisms. Children work with what is available to perform the good and clever pupil, and where possible to pursue lines of desire. The scale of their deviation is limited, both temporally, evident only in short bursts, and spatially, frequently in the spaces out of the gaze of adults.

Wider social structures also entangle with children's lines of desire. As in Youdell's (2011) ethnography, these children have similarly 'been propelled into this school and these subjectivities through the operations of the educational assemblage', that help to define them (p.84). In the classroom, the misdemeanours of middle class children are read very differently to the children who are working class or from ethnic minorities, whose flawed bodies — described as having 'slow' brains or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder — are more frequently blamed. Privileged male bodies, and middle class children with the cultural capital demanded by school, are further privileged to pursue lines of desire more openly. Two boys, Clark and Alexis, for example, are more vocally critical of school practices than other boys whose parents did not go to university, who instead engage in tactics out of the gaze of staff, such as missing out pages when reading set books.

There are differences at home in how much the children discuss and negotiate, or direct their activities, but all talk, create and play, including with parents. This lack of synchronicity between the logic of their embodied home experiences and that of the on-task classroom is evident in the children's productive pursuit of lines of desire. Some children are more out-of-synch than others, with middle class children more clearly encouraged to discuss and negotiate solutions with parents, and to pursue intellectual and creative interests.

The scope to pursue lines of desire is also wider for more advantaged children. Similar to those in secondary school (Kulz, 2017; Reay, 2017), a stricter work ethic is demanded from primary children of working class backgrounds. For example, it is working class children receiving additional literacy support and homework. It is the middle class parents of children already succeeding who are 'not really into the idea' of homework, preferring instead for

children to follow their ‘own interests at home and being creative’ (mother). What is considered unnecessary (and perhaps unliveable) for these children (and perhaps unbearable for their parents), is viewed as adequate and necessary for working class children.

### **Children’s politics**

Children’s lines of desire manifest in different ways and at different times; class and gender are sometimes evident, but their paths escape what a Rancièrian logic would consider the reifying conditions put onto children (good/bad, clever/plodder, middle/working class, male/female, etc.). What unites these children is their intelligence and imagination, and their lines offer the opportunity to experiment with subjectivity. There are some gains for the children to take up the subject positions of the ‘good’ and ‘clever’ child, but in both cases ‘the existing distribution of sensible remains unaffected’ (Bingham and Biesta, 2010, p.85). The desiring child, however, challenges the perceptual and epistemic order of the on-task classroom, offering a momentary liberation from the demanding rigidity of the current education system. The pursuit to think and understand — which for Alice includes storytelling, but children also use humour, movement, sound and peer collaboration — offers sporadic moments of democracy, exposing limitations in the distribution of what is understood as sensible in the current order that favours children learn mostly without imagination, movement or speech, and alone. The practices of the children are not a plea to be included in the existing social order, but instead highlight its democratic deficit, in which they, and their many languages, are viewed unequally.

In this way, the children’s lines of desire are ‘political’, with the presumption of equality seen in these momentary practices. The children do not subordinate their intelligence to another, but instead validate the existing equality of their intelligence. Dissensus is an act of subjectification challenging the consensus of order and fixed identity and, as such, is ‘a way of being that had no place and no part in the existing order of things’ (Biesta, 2010, p.547). The children’s emancipation rests with themselves, acting as equals. When Alice writes her own sentence, she acts as if equal to adults to create at will. Equality here is where children have something to contribute beyond their conformity (being ‘good’), including academic efforts and attainment (being ‘clever’). This is a ‘performative politics’, in which the ‘flight from and foreclosure of one subjectivity . . . opens up the possibility of another subjectivity’, while also ‘installing the constraints of this subjectivation’ (Youdell, 2011, p.84) with the desiring child remaining unrecognisable in the classroom. It is not necessary that children



consciously presuppose their equality, nor that they succeed in the moment but fail to change the conditions of the classroom; their practices remain democratic (May, 2010).

Although children's agency is dependent upon their familial contexts, classroom materiality, and interpersonal classroom relationships, rarely is their dissensus a collective action; instead, they engage in disparate and fragmented practices. Nolas and colleagues (2017) draw attention to children's 'common concerns' (p.1), seen in 'mundane activities' and 'banal spaces' (p.7), as a way to think about their connections to activism. The entanglement of children's lines of desire trace relationships of concern, building the story of what they collectively see as important. This includes the desire for transformation (educational purpose), areas of relevance and interest to their lives (curriculum), as well as engaging methods and supportive relationships with which to pursue these (pedagogy). The children are not demanding better school conditions but their actions offer a critique of current educational policies and practices.

### **Children's agency: pressing concern for education**

Similar to secondary school research (Thomson *et al.*, 2010), this study identifies how the Year One classroom, does not connect with the children's everyday concerns; activities are sometimes too challenging for some children or not challenging enough for others. They do not sufficiently advance what children know and do not use what they know to create something unique. The paper highlights a false binary between conformity and resistance, and the dual dimension of agency as both 'potential and constraint' (Abebe, 2019, p.8); within conformity there is also resistance, and where children appear to deviate they are pursuing a desire to be educated.

Children are at once independent, navigating the classroom, but also dependent on the social relationships and material conditions that constrain or create opportunities for agency. An emphasis on pupil agency does not demand individualising solutions, such as improved pupil character, but calls for collective action (*ibid.*). Oswell (2009) argues that the noise of children's voices 'become political speech only through the alliances and networks with others', itself 'dependent on the architectonics of audible spaces' (p.14. An improved 'societal acoustic', possible of transmitting children's sound (or lack of), demands firstly an end to the 'denial' that they have nothing of concern to say, and secondly the formation of 'creative and productive solidarities' (Nolas, 2014, n.p.); something children already

demonstrate when supporting peers. In schools, this must be underpinned by a commitment to supportive relationships aimed at tackling inequality.

The primary education system is currently fraught with an avoidance of risk that limits children and staff agency to explore alternative possibilities beyond the narrow confines of the current demanding curriculum driven by a concern for performance and accountability. Staff work hard to ensure coverage and to document that children make expected progress. Children's competence in the on-task culture demonstrates their adaptability to the classroom order, which gets them so far in learning existing knowledge, which matters educationally and is core to exam success. Jackson (1968) identifies a tension between the demand for conformity and the type of curiosity integral to scholarship that 'calls for sublimated forms of aggression' (p.36) seen in the types of probing, poking, exploring, questioning and challenging of authority seen in children's lines of desire. A concern with learning only as adaptability, suggests Biesta (2016), does not allow for transformation of the subject; it denies children the possibility to express something of themselves, with expectations that are too narrow, rather than ambitious: what matters is less that students study the diverse explications of others, 'but that they *speak*' (Biesta, 2010b, p.549).

Through children's lines of desire, they *speak*; discovering 'there are a thousand paths in intellectual space open to his will' (Rancière, 1991, p.59). The lines highlight what might be achieved if schools include a model of education that emphasises 'not knowing' through exploring with children the world creatively and experimentally to see what transpires (Webb and Kirby, 2019). Michael Young (2019) identifies how 'A curriculum does not replace knowledge that pupils bring to school: it challenges it and enables pupils to transform and extend it by engaging with new and often troubling ideas with a teacher they have learned to trust' (p.15). Young's vision includes, but extends beyond, models of education concerned with knowledge acquisition; it encourages a diffraction between curricular and children's knowledge. Here knowledge is emergent rather than something possessed, and pupils achieve agency through experiencing and responding to the world differently. This requires pupils to engage with uncertainty where there are no correct answers: to ask questions, share opinions and create ideas. This in turn, may encourage pupils to value, learn and engage more deeply with curricular knowledge, as a springboard from which to transform what they know, do and can be in the world.

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